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ABSTRACT

Discovering the value of after-school programs to school improvement initiatives and student achievement, one school district implemented a parent involvement component. Goals identified for the program were: to provide opportunities for parents and school staff to work as partners, and to share information about parent involvement and assets to increase student positive behavior and academic achievement. The "Family Night Out" program began with the kindergarten classes. Families were invited to participate at the school their child attended. Each classroom of kindergarten families met in separate sessions with the teacher, guidance counselor, and principal. A family meal was provided, as was child care for siblings. Parents met after the meal to learn about and share information on ways to build assets with their children, in their homes, and in school. The kindergartners met with an instructor and engaged in activities similar to the parent sessions so family members could discuss session topics at home. Six "nights" were held for each kindergarten class, with topics ranging from rules/consequences, safety, and positive and negative influences, to gifts parents give their children that do not cost money, and family celebrations. The cost of the "Family Night Out" program was covered by grant monies. Since the program's inception in 1995, grade levels have been added each year, and the program currently reaches K-8 students and their families. In evaluation comments, parents stated they were very pleased with the program overall and were glad they had a chance to participate. (HTH)

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Family Night Out: An After School Program.

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Family Night Out: An After School Program

School leaders are becoming more and more aware of the value after school programs can bring to school improvement initiatives and student achievement. Educators think of after school programs as tutoring sessions or day care for latch key children. These are important programs, but as principal in a rural school district, I learned the value of taking after school programming to a new level.

It all began when a Comprehensive Prevention Education Council was formed in our district. This council was charged with the responsibility of formulating a plan to foster healthy development among our students. The council consisted of teachers from all levels, kindergarten through 12th grade, our school guidance counselor, parents, community agency members, and myself as principal of an elementary school in the district. Council members reviewed programs and activities in the district and discovered a need for a parent component. The family became the focus of this group's project.

Researchers (Comer, 1984; Epstein, 1995) have been documenting the link between parent involvement and successful schools for years. These researchers note it is important for parents to become involved as valuable partners in education, and it is also important for this involvement to be extended into the home. The more this can be achieved, the more students benefit through increases in academic performance.

Silbert and Berry (1993) state schools must work with families to reduce negative risks. Schools can implement programs to share information with parents on increasing positive behaviors and reducing negative behaviors. Benson (1997) out of Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, identified forty assets children need growing up to become resilient, healthy adults. The assets are divided into internal and external assets.

Internal assets include commitments, values, and competencies, while external assets include support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and opportunities for constructive use time. Our school council kept these in mind and developed a program for families that focused on sharing information about these assets. The goals identified for the program were: (a) to provide opportunities for parents and school staff members to work as partners, and (b) to share information about parent involvement and assets to increase student positive behavior and academic achievement.

The program, called "Family Night Out," took shape the fall of 1995 with the kindergarten class. The kindergarten class was our target population as these parents were at the brink of a fresh start with their children and school. Families were invited to participate in a "Family Night Out" at the school where their children attended kindergarten. Each classroom of kindergarten families met in separate sessions with the classroom teacher, the school guidance counselor and myself as principal. A family meal was provided and childcare for siblings was also included at no charge to families. Parents met after the meal to learn about and share information on ways to build assets with their children, in their homes, and in school. The kindergarten students met with an instructor and engaged in activities similar to the parent sessions so family members could discuss session topics at home.

Six sessions were held for each kindergarten class. Topics ranged from rules/consequences, safety, influences both positive and negative, to gifts we give our children that do not cost money, and a family celebration. Parents and school staff members worked together to develop plans to help foster positive aspects in children's

lives and reduce negative factors. Positive factors deal with support, productive use of time, etc., and negative factors deal with unsafe and unhealthy behaviors.

The "Family Night Out" program did not come without cost. Our district was fortunate to receive Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse prevention funds along with grant money from a community council. These grants were used to fund the family meal, childcare expenses, and material and presentation costs. The program met the requirements of the grants as involving parents with staff members in discussions about enhancing positive behaviors and reducing negative behaviors is a way of preventing students from becoming involved with substance abuse in the future.

The program was held after school during the dinner hours. This was convenient for families as they did not need to prepare a meal and did not need to be concerned with childcare. Attendance was excellent with 50%-80% of the parents present at the various sessions held throughout the school year.

This program has continued since its conception in 1995. Each year grade levels were added and the program currently reaches students in kindergarten through eighth grade and their families. Funding has increased and decreased through the years. In decreased funding years, council members became creative and continued to offer the program.

Parents were asked to submit evaluation comments after each session. Comments stated parents were very pleased with the program overall and were glad they had a chance to participate. Parents would admit they were skeptical at first, but later not only realized the beneficial aspects of the program in the development of their children, but also in the lasting relationships that began during the sessions.

Many positive outcomes resulted from the "Family Night Out" program. Parents and staff members created relationships and partnered together in educating children, families learned tools to help with family rules and boundaries, and parents began to participate in other school events. Our district offers elementary school children a last-day-of-school picnic and game day. There were years we could not find enough parent volunteers to successfully put together the game day. The first year of the "Family Night Out" program, forty parents, out of one hundred kindergarten student families, volunteered for our picnic and game day. This outpour of dedication and commitment spoke volumes in the value of parent involvement in school activities.

Our student academic performance took jumps in a positive direction. As the students went through the grades, we discovered test scores were increasing. Although there may be other reasons for increased test scores, it is not dismissed that the "Family Night Out" program may have had a positive influence.

My advice to school leaders is to include families when you can in the development of after school programming. After school programs can be many things and take many forms. Be creative and work to bring togetherness in your school with your families. The benefits are tremendous.

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